APRIL'S AFIELD.

Owen Wister, in April Lippincott's.

April's afield. April's in the air!
Almost you may see each hour
Willows that at dawn were bare,
Meadows that were brown,
On which the lengthening mellow day has burned,
Creep into green before the sun goes down,
And some black bough, while mortal backs were turned,
Swift stolen into flower.

April's afield. April's in the air!
Fleeting over Earth's slow dust,
Leaving us behind here, where
Pass and pass the years.
Soulless as Echo, she can never know
Our kisses that she hastens, nor our tears.
Not for its watchers do her blossoms blow;
Their day is come: they must.

April's afield. April's in the air!
Heavy Winter turns his feet
Northward with his load of care;
And on April's wings
Unreasoning our human hearts upsoar,
As hearts have done since they were human things,
As human hearts shall do for evermore
When ours forget to beat.

PIETRO GHISLERI.

BY F. MARION CRAWFORD.
Author of "Saracinesca," "The Three Fates," etc.

CHAPTER III.

It is perhaps useless to attempt to trace and recapitulate the causes which had led Laura Carlyon to the state of mind in which she had found courage to tell Arden that she loved him. There might be harder moments in store for her, but this had been the hardest she had known hitherto. Nothing short of a real and great love, she believed, could have carried her through it, and she had been conscious for some days that if the opportunity came she meant to do what she had done. In other words, she had been quite sure that Arden loved her and that she loved him. This being granted, it was in accordance with her character to take the initiative. With far less sympathy than she felt in all her thoughts, she would have understood that a man of his instincts would never speak of his love to her unless almost directly bidden to do so. Laura was slow to make up her mind, sure of her decision when reached, and determined to act upon it without consulting any one. Many people said later that she had sacrificed herself for Lord Herbert's expected fortune, or for his position. A few said that she was a very good woman, and that, finding herself neglected, she had decided to devote her life to the happiness of a very unhappy man for whom she felt a sincere friendship. That was at least the more charitable view. But neither was at all the right one. She honestly and really believed that she loved the man; she saw beyond a doubt that he loved her, and she took the shortest and most direct way of ending all doubts on the subject. On that same night when Arden had quite recovered and had gone home with Ghisleri, she spoke to her mother and told her exactly what had happened.

The Princess of Gerano opened her quiet brown eyes very wide when she heard the news. She was handsome still at five and forty, a little stout perhaps, but well proportioned. Her light brown hair was turning gray at the temples, but there were few lines in her smooth, calm face, and her complexion was still almost youthful, though with little coloring. She looked what she was, a woman of the world, very far from worldly, not conscious of half the evil that went on around her, and much given to inward contemplation of a religious kind when not actively engaged in social duty. She had seen Laura's growing appreciation of Arden, and had noticed the frequency of the latter's visits to the house. But she had herself learned to like him very much during the last month, and it never suggested itself to her that he could wish to marry Laura nor that Laura could care for him, considering that he was undeniably a cripple. It was no wonder that she was surprised.

"Dear child," she said, "I do not know what to say. Of course I have found out what a really good man he is, though he is so fond of that wild Ghisleri—they are always together. I have a great admiration for Lord Herbert. As far as position goes, there is nothing better, and I suppose he is rich enough to support you, though I do not know. You see, darling, you have nothing but the little I can give you. But never mind that—there is only that one other thing—I wish he were not——"

She checked herself, far too delicate to hurt her daughter by too direct a reference to Arden's physical shortcomings. But Laura, strange to say, was not sensitive on that point.

"I know, mother," she said, "he is deformed. It is of no use denying it, as he says himself. But if I do not mind that—if I do not think of it at all when I am with him, why should every one else care? After all, if I marry him, it is to please myself, and not the people who will ask us to dinner."

The young girl laughed happily as she thought of the new life before her, and of how she would make everything easy for poor Arden, and make him quite forget that he could hardly walk. Her mother looked at her with quiet wonder.

"Think well before you act, dear," she said. "Marriage is a very serious thing. There is no drawing back afterward, and if you were to be at all unkind after you are married——"

"O mother, how can you think that of me?"

"No—at least, you would never mean it. You are too good for that. But it would break the poor man's heart. He is very sensitive, it is not every man who faints when he finds out that a young girl loves him—fortunately, not every man," she added with a smile.

"If every one loved as we do, the world would be much happier," said Laura, kissing her mother. "Do not be afraid, I will not break his heart."

"God grant you may not break your own, dear!" The Princess spoke in a lower voice, and turned away her face to hide the tears that stood in her eyes.

"Mine, mother!" Laura bent over her as she sat in her dressing-chair. "What is it?" she asked anxiously, as she saw that her mother's cheek was wet.

"You are very dear to me, child," murmured the Princess, drawing the young head down to her breast, and kissing the thick black hair.

So the matter was settled and Laura had her way. It is not easy to say how most mothers would have behaved under the circumstances. There are worldly ones enough who would have received the news far more gladly than the Princess of Gerano did; and there are doubtless many who would refuse a cripple for a son-in-law on any condition whatever. Laura's mother did what she thought right, which is more than most of us can say of our actions.

The Prince was almost as much surprised as his wife when he learned the news, but he was convinced that he had nothing to say in the matter. Laura was quite free to do as she pleased, and, moreover, it was a good thing that she should marry a man of her own faith, and ultimately live among her own people, since nothing could make either a Catholic or a Roman of her. But he was not altogether pleased with her choice. He had an Italian's exaggerated horror of deformity, and though he liked Lord Herbert, he could never quite overcome his repulsion for his outward defects. There was nothing to be done, however, and on the whole the marriage had much in its favor in his eyes.

The engagement was accordingly announced with due formality, and the wedding day was fixed for the Saturday after Easter, which fell early in that year. Not until the day before the Princess told the news to every one did Arden communicate it to Ghisleri. He had perfect confidence in his friend's discretion, but having said that he would not speak of the engagement to any one until the Princess did, he kept his word to the letter. He asked Pietro to drive with him, far out upon the campagna. When they had passed the last houses and were in the open country he spoke.

"I am going to marry Miss Carlyon," he said simply, but he glanced at Ghisleri's face to see the look of surprise he expected.

"Since you announce it, my dear friend, I congratulate you with all my heart," answered Pietro. "Of course I knew it some time ago."

"You knew it?" Arden was very much astonished.

"It was not very hard to guess. You loved each other, you went constantly to the house and spent your evenings with her in other people's houses, there was no reason why you should not marry—accordingly I took it for granted that you would be married. You see that I was right. I am delighted. Ask me to the wedding."

Arden laughed.

"I thought you would never enter one of our churches!" he exclaimed.

"I did not know that I had such a reputation for devout obedience to general rules," answered Ghisleri.

"As for your reputation, my dear fellow, it is not that of a saint. But I once saw you saying your prayers."

"I dare say," replied Pietro, indifferently. "I sometimes do, but not generally in the Corso, nor on the Pincio. How long was that? Do you happen to remember?"

"Six or seven years, I fancy—oh, yes! It was in that little church in Dieppe, just before you went off on that long cruise—you remember it, too, I fancy."

"I suppose I thought I was going to be drowned, and was seized with a passing ague of premature repentance," said Ghisleri, lighting a cigarette.

"What a queer fellow you are!" observed Arden, striking a light in his turn. "I was talking with Miss Carlyon about you some time ago, and I told her you were a sinner, but a righteous one."

"A shade worse than others, perhaps, because I know a little better what I am doing," answered Ghisleri, with a sneer, evidently intended for himself.

He was looking at the tomb of Cecilia Metella, as it rose in sight above the horses' heads at the turn of the road, and he thought of what had happened to him there years ago, and of the consequences. Arden knew nothing of the associations the ruin had for his friend, and laughed again. He was in a very happy humor on that day, as he was for many days afterward.

"I can never quite make you out," he said. "Are you good, bad, or a humbug? You cannot be both good and bad at once, you know."

"No. But one may be often bad, and sometimes do decently good deeds," observed Ghisleri, with a dry laugh. "Let us talk of your marriage instead of speculating on my salvation, or more probably perdition, if there really is such a thing. When is the wedding day?"

Arden was full of plans for the future, and they drove far out talking of all that was before the young couple.

On the following day the news was announced to the city and the world. The world held up its hands in wonder, and its tongue wagged for a whole week and a few days more. Laura Carlyon was to marry a penniless cripple of the most dissipated habits. How shocking! Of course every one knew that Lord Herbert had not fainted at all that night at the Palazzo Braccio, but had succumbed, in the natural course of events, to the effects of the champagne he had taken at dinner. That was now quite certain. And the whole world was well aware that his father had cut him off with a pittance on account of his evil ways, and that his brother had twice paid his gambling debts to save the family name from disgrace. Englishmen as a race, and English cripples in particular, were given to drink and high play. The man had actually been the worse for wine when talking to Laura Carlyon in her mother's house, and Ghisleri had been obliged to carry him out for decency's sake before anything worse happened. Scandalous! It was a wonder that Ghisleri, who, after all, was a gentleman, could associate with such a fellow. After all, nobody ever liked Laura Carlyon since she had first appeared in society, soon after dear Donna Adele's marriage. It was as well that she should go to England and live with her tipsy cripple. She was good-looking, as some people admitted. She might win the heart of her brother-in-law and induce him to pay her husband's debts a third time. They were said to be enormous.

The men were, on the whole, more charitable. Conscious of their own shortcomings, they did not blame Lord Herbert very severely for taking a little too much "extra dry." They did, however, abuse him somewhat roundly at the club, for having gone to the Gerano party at all when he should have known that he was not steady. Of the facts themselves they had not the slightest doubt. Unfortunately for one of them who happened to be declaiming on the subject, but who was really by no means a bad fellow, he did not notice that Ghisleri had entered the room before he had finished his speech. When he had quite done, Ghisleri came forward.

"Arden is my old friend," he said quietly. "He never drinks. He has a disease of the heart and he fainted from the heat. The doctor and I took him home together. I hope that none of you will take up this disgusting story which was started by the women. And I hope Pietrasanta there will do me the honor to believe what I say, and tell you that he was mistaken."

Ghisleri was not a pleasant person to quarrel with, and moreover had the reputation of being truthful. His story, too, was quite as probable as the other, to say the least of it. Don Giambattista Pietrasanta glanced quickly from one to the other of the men who were seated around him as though to ask their advice in the matter. Several of them nodded almost imperceptibly, as though counselling him to do as Ghisleri requested. There was nothing at all aggressive in the latter's manner, either, as he quietly lit a cigarette while waiting for the other's answer. Suddenly a deep voice was heard from another corner of the room. The Marchese de San Giacinto, giant in body and fortune, had been reading the paper with the utmost indifference during all the previous conversation. All at once he spoke, deliberately and to the point.

"It is no business of mine," he said, "as I do not know Lord Herbert Arden except by sight. But I was at the dance the other night, and half an hour before the occurrence you are discussing, Lord Herbert was standing beside me, talking of the Egyptian difficulty with the French ambassador. I have often seen men drunk. Lord Herbert Arden was, in my opinion, perfectly sober."

Having delivered himself of this statement, San Giacinto put his very black cigar between his teeth again and took up the evening paper he had been reading.

In the face of such men as Ghisleri and the Marchese, it would have been the merest folly to continue any opposition. Moreover, Pietrasanta was neither stupid nor bad, and he was not a coward.

"I do not know Lord Herbert Arden myself," he said without affectation. "What I said I got on hearsay, and the whole story is evidently a fabrication which we ought to deny. For the rest, Ghisleri, if you are not quite satisfied—" He stopped and looked at Pietro.

"My dear fellow," said the latter, "what more could I have to say about the affair? You all seemed to be in the dark, and I wanted to clear the matter up for the sake of my old friend. That is all. I am very much obliged to you."

After this incident there was less talk at the clubs, and in a few days the matter dropped. But the world said, as usual, that all the men were afraid of Ghisleri, who was a duellist, and of San Giacinto, who was a giant, and who had taken the trouble to learn to fence when he first came to Rome, and that they had basely eaten their words. Men were such cowards, said the world.

Lord Herbert and Laura lived in blissful ignorance of what was said about them. The preparations for the wedding were already begun, and Laura's modest trousseau was almost all ordered. She and Arden had discussed their future, and having realized that they must live in a very economical fashion for the present and so long as it pleased Heaven to preserve Arden's maternal uncle among the living, they decided that the wedding should be as quiet and unostentatious as possible. The old Prince, however, though far too conscientious to have settled a penny of his inherited fortune upon Laura, even if she had chosen to marry a pauper, was not ungenerous in other ways, and considered himself at liberty to offer the pair some very magnificent silver, which he was able to pay for out of his private economies. As for Donna Adele, she presented them with a couple of handsome wine-coolers—doubtless in delicate allusion to the fictitious story about the champagne Lord Herbert was supposed to have taken. The implied insult, if there was any, was not at all noticed by those who had never heard the tale, however, and Adele had to bide her time for the present.

Meanwhile the season tore along at a breakneck pace, and Lent was fast approaching. Everybody saw and danced with almost everybody else every night, and some of them supped afterward and gambled till midday, and were surprised to find that their nerves were shaky, and their livers slightly eccentric, and their eyes anything but limpid. But they all knew that the quiet time was coming, the Lent wherein no man can dance, nor woman either, and they amused themselves with a contempt for human life which would have amounted to heroism if displayed in a good cause. "They" of course means the gay set of that particular year. As the Princess of Gerano gave regular informal dances, and two balls at the end of Carnival, she and her daughter were considered to belong more or less to the company of the chief merry-makers. The Savelli couple were in it, also, as a matter of course. Gouache was in it when he pleased, a dozen or fifteen young members of the diplomatic corps, old Spicca, who always went everywhere, the Contessa dell' Armi, whose husband was in Parliament and rarely went into society, Ghisleri and twenty or thirty others, men and women who were young or thought themselves so.

About three weeks before Ash Wednesday, Anastase Gouache, the perennially young, had a brilliant inspiration. His studio was in an historical palace, and consisted of three halls which might have passed for churches in any other country, so far as their size was concerned. He determined to give a Shrove Tuesday supper to the gay set, with a tableau, and a long final waltz afterward, by way of interring the mangled remains of the season, as he expressed it. The supper should be at the usual dinner hour instead of at 1 o'clock, because the gay set was not altogether as scarlet as it was painted, and did not, as a whole, care to dance into the morning of Ash Wednesday. The tableau should represent Carnival meeting Lent. The Contessa dell' Armi should be in it, and Ghisleri, and Donna Adele, and possibly San Giacinto might be induced to appear as a mask. His enormous stature would be very imposing. The Contessa, with her classic features and violet eyes, would make an admirable nun, and there would be no difficulty in getting together a train of revellers. Ghisleri, lean, straight, and tall, would do for a satanic being of some kind, and could head the Carnival procession. The whole thing would not last five minutes, and the dancing should begin at once.

"Could you not say something, my friend?" asked Gouache, as he talked the matter over with Ghisleri.

"I could, if you could find something for me to say," answered the latter. "But of what use would it be?"

"The density of the public," replied the great painter, "is, to use the jargon of science, as cotton wool multiplied into cast iron. You either sink into it and make no noise at all, or you knock your head against and cannot get through it. You have never sent a picture to the Salon without naming it, or you would understand exactly what I mean. They took a picture I once painted for a church, for a scene from the Decameron, I believe—but that was when I was young and had illusions. On the whole, you had better find something to say, and say it—verse, if possible. They say you have a knack at verses."

"Carnival meeting Lent," said Ghisleri, thoughtfully. Then he laughed. "I will try—though I am no poet. I will trust a little to my acting to help my lame feat."

Ghisleri laughed again, as though an amusing idea had struck him. That night he went home early, and as very often happened, in a bad humor with himself and with most things. He was a very unhappy man, who felt himself to be always the centre of a conflict between opposing passions, and he had long been in the habit of throwing into a rough, impersonal shape, the thoughts that crossed his mind about himself and others, when he was alone at night. Being, as he very truly said, no poet, he quickly tore up such odds and ends of halting rhyme or stumbling prose, either as soon as they were written, or the next morning. Whatever the form of these productions might be, the ideas they expressed were rarely feeble and indeed were sometimes so strong that they might have even shocked some unusually sensitive person in the gay set.

Being, as has been said, in a bad humor on that particular evening, he naturally had something to say to himself on paper, and as he took his pencil he thought of Gouache's suggestion. In a couple of hours he had got what he wanted and went to sleep. The great artist liked the verses when Ghisleri read them to him on the following day, the Contessa consented to act the part of the nun, and the affair was settled.

It was a great success. Gouache's wife, Donna Faustina, had entered into her husband's plans with all her heart. She was of the Montevarchi family, sister to the Marchesa di San Giacinto, the latter being a Saracinesca, as every Italian knows. Gouache did things in a princely fashion, and sixty people, including all the gay set and a few others, sat down to the dinner which Anastase was pleased to call a supper. Every one was very gay. Almost every one was in some fancy dress or mask, there was no order of precedence, and all were placed where they would have the best chance of amusing themselves. The halls of the studio, with their magnificent tapestries and almost priceless objects of art, were wonderful to see in the bright light. Many of the costumes were really superb, and all were brilliant. No one knew what was to take place after supper, but every one was sure there was to be dancing, and all were aware that it was the last dance before Easter, and that the best dancers in Rome were all present.

One of the halls had been hastily fitted up as a theatre, with a little stage, a row of footlights, and a background representing a dark wall, with a deep archway in the middle, like the door of a church. When every one was seated, a deep, clear voice spoke out a little prologue from behind the scenes, and the figures, as they were described, moved out from opposite sides of the stage to meet and group themselves before the painted doorway. Let prologue and verse speak for themselves.

"It was nearly midnight—the midnight that ends Shrove Tuesday and begins Ash Wednesday, dividing Carnival from Lent. I left the tables, where all the world of Rome was feasting, and pretending that the feast was the last of the year. The brilliant light flashed upon silver and gold, dyed itself in amber and purple wine, ran riot amongst jewels, and blazed upon many a fair face and snowy neck. The clocks were all stopped, lest some tinkling bell should warn men and women that the day of laughter was over, and that the hour of tears had struck. But I, broken-hearted, sick in soul and weary of the two months' struggle with evil fate, turned away from them and left them to all they loved, and to all that I could never love again.

"I passed through the deserted ballroom, and my heart sank as I thought of what was over and done. The polished floor was strewn with withered blossoms, with torn and crumpled favors from the dance, with shreds of gauze and lace; many chairs were overturned; the light streamed down like day upon a great desolation; the heated air was faint with the sad odor of dead flowers. There was the corner where we sat, she and I, to-night, last week, a week before that—where we shall never sit again, for neither of us would. I shivered as I went out into the night.

"Through the dark streets I went, not knowing and not caring whither, nor hearing the tinkling mandolines and changing songs of the revellers who passed me on their homeward way."

At this point a mandoline was really heard in the very faintest tones from behind the scenes, playing scarcely above a whisper, as it were, the famous "Tout pour l'amour" waltz of Waldteuffel.

"Suddenly," the voice resumed, above the delicate notes of the instrument, "the bells rang out and I knew that my last Carnival was dead." Here deep-toned bells struck twelve, while the mandoline still continued. "Then, all at once, I was aware of two figures in the gloom, advancing toward the door of a church in front of me. The one was a woman, a nun in white robe and black hood, whose saintly violet eyes seemed to shine in the darkness. The other was a monk."

The Contessa dell' Armi came slowly forward, her pale, clear face lifted and thrown into strong relief by the black headdress, grasping a heavy rosary in her folded hands. Behind her came San Giacinto, recognizable only by his colossal stature, his face hidden in the shadow of a black cowl. Both were admirable, and a murmur of satisfaction ran through the room.

"As they reached the door," continued the reader, "a wild train of maskers broke into the street."

Ghisleri entered from the opposite scene, arrayed somewhat in the manner of Mephistopheles, a mandoline slung over his shoulder, on which he was playing. Donna Adele and a dozen others followed him closely, in every variety of brilliant Carnival dress, dancing forward with tambourines and castanets, their eyes bright, their steps cadenced to the rhythm of the waltz tune which now broke out loud and clear—fair young women with flushed cheeks, all life, and motion, and laughter; and young men following them closely, laughing, and talking, and singing, all dancing in and out with changing steps. Then all at once the music died away to a whisper; the nun and the monk stood back as though in horror against the church door, while the revellers grouped themselves together in varied poses around them, Ghisleri the central figure in the midst, bowing with a diabolical smile before the white-robed nun.

"In front of all," said the voice again, "stood one whose face I shall never forget, for it was like my own. The features were mine, but upon them were reflected all the sins of my life, and all the evil I have done. I thought the other revellers did not see him."

Again the music swelled and rose, and the train of dancers passed on with song and laughter, and disappeared on the opposite side of the stage. Ghisleri alone stood still before the saint-like figure of the Contessa dell' Armi, bowing low and holding out to her a tall red glass.

"He who was like me stayed behind," continued the reader, "and the light from his glass seemed to shine upon the saintly woman's face, and she drew back as though from contamination, to the monk's side for protection. I knew her face when I saw it—the face I have known too long, too well. Then he who was like me spoke to her, and the voice was my own, but as I would have had it when I have been worst."

As the reader ceased Ghisleri began to speak. His voice was strong, but capable of considerable softness and passionate expression, and he did his best to render his own irregular verses both intelligible and moving to his hearers, in which effort he was much helped by the dress he wore and by the gestures he made use of.

"So we meet at the last! You the saint, I the time-proved sinner.
You the young, I the old; I the world-worn, you the beginner;
At the end of the season here, with a glass of wine
To discuss the salvation and—well—the mine and thine
Of all the souls we have met this year, and dealt with,
Of those you have tried to make feel, and those I have felt with;
Though, after all, dear Saint, had we met in heaven
Before you got saintship, or I the infernal leaven
That works so hot to kill the old angel in me—
If you had seen the world then, as I was able to see
Before Sergeant-Major Michael gave me that fall,—
Not a right fall, mind you, taking the facts in all,—
We might have been on the same side both. But now
It is yours to cry over lost souls, as it's mine to show them how
They may stumble and tumble into the infernal slough.
So here we are. Now tell me—your honor true—
What do you think of our season? Which wins? I? You?
Ha, ha, ha! Sweet friend, you can hardly doubt
The result of this two months' hard-fought wrestling bout.
I have won. You have lost the game. I drive a trade
Which I invented—perhaps—but you have made.
Without your heaven, friend Saint, what would be my hell?
Without your goodness, could I hope to do so well
With the poor little pedler's pack of original sin
They handed me down, when they turned me out to begin
My devil's trade with souls. But now I ask
Why for eternal penance they gave me so light a task?
You have not condescended from heaven to taste our carnival feast,
But if you had tasted it, you would admit at least
That the meats were passably sweet, and might allure
The nicest of angels, whose tastes are wholly pure.
Old friend—I hate you! I hate your saintly face,
Your holy eyes, your vague celestial grace,
You are too cold for me, whose soul must smelt
In fires whose fury you have never felt.
But come, unbend a little. Let us chatter
Of what we like best, of what our pride may flatter,—
Salvation and damnation—there's the theme—
Your trade and mine—what I am, and what you seem.
Come, count the souls we have played for, you and I,
The broken hearts you have lost on a careless jog of the die,
Hearts that were broken in fire, by one short, sharp fault of the head,
Souls lifted on pinions of fire, to sink on wings of lead.
We have gambled, and I have won, while you have steadily lost,
I laughing, you weeping your senseless saintly tears each time you tossed.
So now—give it up! Dry your eyes; your heaven's a dream.
Sell your saintship for what it is worth, and come over—the Devil's supreme!
Make Judas Iscariot envy the sweets of our sin—
Poor Judas, who ended himself where I could have wished to begin!
A chosen complexion—hell's fruit would not have been wasted
Had he lived to eat his fill at the feast he barely tasted.
Ah, my friend, you are horribly good! Oh! I know you of old;
I know all your virtues, your graces, your beauties; I know they are cold!
But I know that far down in the depths of your crystal-line soul
There's a spot the archangel physician might not pronounce whole.
There's a hell in your heaven; there's a heaven in my hell. There we meet.
What's perdition to you is salvation to me. Ah, the delicate sweet
Of mad meetings, of broken confessions, of nights unblest!
Oh, the shadowy horror of hate that haunts love's steps without rest,
The desire to be dead—to see dead both the beings one hates,
One's self and the other, twin victims of opposite fates!
How I hate you! You thing beyond Satan's supremest temptation,
You creature of light for whom God has ordained no damnation,
You escape me, the being whose searing hand lovingly lingers
On the neck of each sinner to brand him with five red-hot fingers!
You escape me—you dare scoff at me—and I, poor old pretender,
Must sue for your beautiful soul with temptation more tender
Than a man can find for a woman, when night in her moonlit glory
Silvers a word to a poem, makes a poem of a commonplace story!
So I sue here at your feet for your soul and the gold of your heart,
To break my own if I lose you—Lose you? No—do not start.
You angel—you bitter-sweet creature of heaven, I love you and hate you!
For I know what you are, and I know that my sin cannot mate you.
I know that you are better than I—by the blessing of God!
And I hate what is better than I by the blessing of God!
What right has the Being Magnificent, reigning supreme,
To wield the huge might that is His, in a measure extreme?
What right has God got of his strength to make you all good,
And me bad from the first and weighed down in my sin's leaden hood?
What right have you to be pure, my angel, when I am foul?
What right have you to the light, while I, like an owl,
Must blink in hell's darkness and count my sins by the bead,
While you can get all you pray for, the wine and the mead
Of a heavenly blessing, showered upon you straight—
Because you chance to stand on the consecrate side of the gate?
Ah! Give me a little nature, give me a human truth!
Give me a heart that feels—and falls, as a heart should—without ruth!
Give me a woman who loves and a man who loves again,
Give me the instant's joy that ends in an age of pain,
Give me the one dear touch that I love—and that you fear—
And I will give my empire for the kingdom you hold dear!
I will cease from tempting and torturing, I will let the poor sinner go,
I will turn my blind eyes heavenward and forget this world below,
I will change from lying to truth, and be forever true—
If you will only love me—and give the Devil his due."

It had been previously arranged that at the last words the nun should thrust back his Satanic majesty and took refuge in the church. But it turned out otherwise. As he drew near the conclusion, Ghisleri crept stealthily up to the Contessa's side, and threw all the persuasion he possessed into his voice. But it was most probably the Contessa's love of surprising the world which led her to do the contrary of what was expected. At the last line of his speech, she made one wild gesture of despair, and threw herself backward upon Ghisleri's ready arm. For one moment he looked down into her white upturned face, and his own grew pale as his gleaming eyes met hers. With characteristic presence of mind, San Giacinto, the monk, bent his head, and stalked away in holy horror as the curtain fell.

CHAPTER IV.

As the curtain went down a burst of applause rang through the room. The poetry, if it could be called poetry, had assuredly not been of a high order, and as for the sentiments it expressed, a good number of the audience were more than usually shocked. But the whole thing had been effective, unexpected, and striking, especially the ending, over which the world smacked its lips.

"I do not like it at all," said Laura Carlyon to Arden, as they left the seats where they had sat together through the little performance.

"They looked very well," he answered thoughtfully. "As for what he said, it was Ghisleri. That is the man's character. He will talk in that way while he does not believe a word he says, or only one out of ten."

"Then I do not like his character, nor him," returned the young lady, frankly. "But I should not say it to you, dear, because he is your best friend. He shows you all the good there is in him, I suppose, and he shows us all the bad."

"No one ever said a truer thing of him," said Arden, limping along by her side. "But I admire the man's careless strength in what he does."

"It is easy to use strong language," replied Laura, quietly. "It is quite another thing to be strong. I believe he is weak, morally speaking. But then, how should I know? One only guesses at such things, after all."

"Yes, it is all guesswork. But I think I understand him better to-night than before."

A moment later the sound of dance music came from the most distant and the largest of the rooms. Ghisleri and the Contessa dell' Armi were already there. She was so slight of figure that she draped her nun's dress over her gown, and had only to drop it to be herself again. They took a first turn together, and Ghisleri talked softly all the time he danced.

"Shockingly delightful—the whole thing!" exclaimed Donna Adele, watching them. "How well they acted it? They must have rehearsed very often."

"Quite often enough, I have no doubt," said the Marchesa di San Giacinto, with a laugh.

An hour or two passed away and Laura Carlyon found herself walking about with Ghisleri after dancing with him. He was a very magnificent personage in his scarlet, black, and gold costume, and Laura herself looked far more saintly in her evening gown than the Contessa dell' Armi had looked in the dress of a nun. The two made a fine contrast, and some one said so, unfortunately within hearing of both Adele Savelli and Maddalena dell' Armi. The latter turned her cold face quickly and looked at Laura and Ghisleri, but her expression did not change.

"What a very uncertain person that dear Ghisleri is!" observed Donna Adele to Pietrasanta, as she noticed the Contessa's movement. She spoke just so loud that the latter could hear her, then turned away with her companion and walked in the opposite direction.

Meanwhile Ghisleri and Laura were together. The young girl felt an odd sensation as her hand lay on his arm, as though she were doing something wrong. She did not understand his life, nor him, being far too young and innocent of life's darker thoughts and deeds. She had said that she disliked him, because that seemed best to express what she felt—a certain vague wish not to be too near him, a certain timidity when he was within hearing which she did not feel at other times.

"You did not mean any of those things you said, did you, Signor Ghisleri?" she asked, scarcely knowing why she put the question.

"I meant them all, and much more of the same kind," answered Pietro, with a hard laugh.

"I am sorry—I would rather not believe it."

"Why?"

"Because it is not right to think such things, nor even to say them in a play."

Ghisleri looked at her in some surprise. Laura felt a sort of impulse of conscience to say what she thought.

"Ah! you are horribly good!" laughed Ghisleri, quoting his own verse.

Laura felt uncomfortable as she met his glance. He really looked very Satanic just then, as his eyebrows went up and the deep lines deepened between his eyes and on his forehead.

"Either one believes or one does not," she said. "If one does——" She hesitated.

"If one does, does it follow that because God is good to you, He has been good to me also, Miss Carlyon?"

His expression changed, and his voice was grave and almost sad. Laura sighed almost inaudibly, but said nothing.

"Will you have anything?" he asked indifferently, after the short pause. "A cup of tea?"

"Thanks, no. I think I will go to my mother."

Ghisleri took her to the Princess's side and left her.

"You seemed to be having a very interesting conversation with Miss Carlyon just now," said the Contessa dell' Armi as he sat down beside her a quarter of an hour later. "What were you talking about?"

"Sin," answered Ghisleri, laconically.

"With a young girl!" exclaimed the Contessa. "But then—English——"

"You need not raise your eyebrows, nor talk in that tone, my dear lady," replied Ghisleri. "Miss Carlyon is quite beyond sarcasms of that sort. Since you are curious, she was telling me that it was sinful to say the things you were good enough to listen to in the tableau, even in a play."

"Ah? And you will be persuaded, I dare say. What beautiful eyes she has! It is a pity she is so clumsy and heavily made. Really, has she got you to promise that you will never say any of those things again—after the way I ended the piece for you?"

"No. I have not promised to be good yet. As for your ending of the performance, I confess I was surprised."

"You did not show it."

"It would hardly have been in keeping with my part, would it?" But I can show you that I am grateful at least."

"For what?" asked the Contessa, raising her eyebrows again. "Do you think I meant anything by it?"

"Certainly not," replied Ghisleri, with the utmost calmness. "I suppose your instinct told you that it would be more novel and effective if the saint yielded than if she played the old-fashioned scene of crushing the devil under her foot."

"Would you have let yourself be crushed?"

"By you—yes." Ghisleri spoke slowly and looked steadily into her eyes.

The Contessa's face softened a little, and she paused before she answered him.

"I wish I knew—I wish I were sure whether I really have any influence over you," she said softly, and then sighed and looked away.

It was very late when the party broke up, though all had professed the most positive intention of going home when the clock struck 12. The Princess of Gerano offered Arden a seat in her carriage, and Pietro Ghisleri went away alone. As he passed through the deserted dining-room and through the hall where he had sat so long with the Contessa, he could not help glancing at the corner where they had talked, and he thought involuntarily of the prologue to the tableau. His face was set rather sternly, but he smiled, too, as he went by.

"It is not my last Carnival yet," he said to himself, as he drew on a great driving-coat which covered his costume completely. Then he went out.

It is very hard to say whether he was a sentimental man or not. Men who write second-rate verses when they are alone generally are; but, on the other hand, those who knew him would not have allowed that he possessed a grain of what is commonly called sentimentality. The word probably means a sort of vague desire to experience rather fictitious emotions, with the intention of believing one's self to be passionate by nature, and in that sense the weakness could not justly be attributed to Ghisleri. But on this particular night he did a thing which many people would undoubtedly have called sentimental. He turned aside from the highway when he left the great palace in which Gouache lived, and he allowed himself to wander aimlessly on through the older part of the city, until he stopped opposite to the door of a church which stood in a broad street near the end of the last byway he had traversed. The night was dark and gloomy and the stillness was only broken now and then by a distant snatch of song, a burst of laughter, or the careless twanging of a guitar, just as Ghisleri had described it. Indeed, it was by no means the first time that he walked home in the small hours of Ash Wednesday morning after a night of gayety and emotion.

It chanced that the church upon which he had accidentally come was the one known as the Church of Prayer and Death. It stands in the Via Giulia, behind the Palazzo Farnese. He realized the fact at once, and it seemed like a bad omen. He stood still a long time looking at the gloomy door with steady eyes.

"Just such a place as this," he said, in a low tone. "Just such a church as that, just such a man as I am. Is this the comedy and was this evening the reality? Or is it the other way?"

He called up before his eyes the scene in which he had acted, and his imagination obeyed him readily enough. He could fancy how the monk and the nun would look, and the train of revellers, and their movements and gestures. But the nun's face was not that of the Contessa. Another shone out vividly in its place.

"Just God!" ejaculated the lonely man. "Am I so bad as that? Not to care after so much?"

He turned upon his heel as though to escape the vision, and walked quickly away, hating himself. But he was mistaken. He cared—as he expressed it—far more than he dreamed of, more deeply, perhaps, in his own self-contradictory, irregular fashion, than the woman of whom he was thinking.

People talked for some time of the Shrove Tuesday feast at Gouache's studio. Then they fell to talking about other things. Lent passed in the usual way, and there was not much change in the lives of the persons most concerned in this history. Ghisleri saw much less of Arden than formerly, of course, as the latter was wholly absorbed by his passion for his future wife. As for the world, it was as much occupied with dinner parties, musical evenings and private theatricals as it had formerly been with dancing. The time sped quickly. The past season had left behind it an enormous Corpus Scandalorum Romanorum which made conversation both easy and delightful. How many of the unpleasant stories concerning Lord Herbert Arden, Laura Carlyon, Pietro Ghisleri and Maddalena dell' Armi could have been distinctly traced to Adele Savelli it is not easy to say. As a matter of fact, very few persons excepting Ghisleri himself took any trouble to trace them at all. To the average worldly taste it is as unpleasant to follow up the origin of a delightfully savory lie as it is to think, while eating, of the true history of a beefsteak, from the meadow to the table by way of the slaughter-house and the cook's fingers.

Holy week came, and the muffled bells, and the silence in houses at other times full and noisy, and the general air of depression which results, most probably from a certain amount of genuine repentance and devotion which is felt in a place where by no means all are bad at heart, and many are sincerely good. The gay set felt uncomfortable, and a certain number experienced for the first time the most distinct aversion to confessing their misdeeds, as they ought to do at least once a year. As far as they were concerned, Ghisleri's verses expressed more truth than they had expected to find in them. Ghisleri himself was rarely troubled by any return of the qualm which had seized him before the door of the Church of Prayer and Death, and never again in the same degree. If he did not go on his way rejoicing, he at all events proceeded without remorse, and was wicked enough and selfish enough to congratulate himself upon the fact.

Arden and Laura were perfectly happy. They, at least, had little cause to reproach themselves with any evil done in the world since they had met, and Arden had assuredly better reason for congratulating himself. It would indeed have been hard to find a happier man than he, and his happiness was perfectly legitimate and well-founded. Whether it would prove durable was another matter not so easy of decision. But the facts of the present were strong enough to crush all apprehension for the future. It was not strange that it should be so.

He could not be said to have led a lonely life. His family were deeply attached to him, and from earliest boyhood everything had been done to alleviate the moral suffering inevitable in his case, and to make his material existence as bearable as possible, in spite of his terrible infirmities. But for the unvarying sympathy of many loving hearts and the unrelaxing care of those who were sincerely devoted to him, Arden could hardly have hoped to attain to manhood at all, much less the healthy moral growth which made him very unlike most men in his condition, or the comparative health of body whereby he was able to enjoy without danger much of what came in his way. He was in reality a much more social and sociable man than his friend Ghisleri, though he did not possess the same elements of success in society. He was indeed sensitive, as has been said, in spite of his denial of the fact, but he was not bitter about his great misfortune. Hitherto only one very painful thought had been connected with his deformity, beyond the constant sense of physical inferiority to other men. He had felt, and not without reason, that he must renounce the love of woman and the hope of wedded happiness, as being utterly beyond the bounds of all human possibility. And now, as though Heaven meant to compensate him to the full for the suffering inflicted and patiently borne, he had won, almost without an effort, the devoted love of the first woman for whom he had seriously cared. It was almost too good.

Love had taken him and had clothed him in a new humanity, as it seemed to him, straightening the feeble limbs, strengthening the poor, ill-matched shoulders, broadening and deepening the sunken chest that never held breath enough before wherewith to speak out full words of passionate happiness. Love had dawned upon the dusk of his dark morning as the dawn of day upon a leaden sea, scattering unearthly blossoms in the path of the royal sun, breathing the sweet breeze of living joy upon the flat waters of unprofitable discontent.

To those who watched the changing world with its manifold scenes and its innumerable actors, whose merest farce is ever and only the prologue to the tragedy which awaits all, there is nothing more wonderful, nothing more beautiful, nothing more touching—perhaps few things more sacred—than the awakening of a noble heart at love's first magic touch. The greater miracle of spring is done before our eyes each year, the sun shines and the grass grows, it rains and all things are refreshed, and the dead seed's heart breaks with the joy of coming life, bursts and shoots up to meet the warmth of the sunshine and be kissed by the west wind. But we do not see, or seeing, care for none of these things in the same measure in which we care for ourselves—and perhaps for others. We turn from the budding flower wearily enough at last, and we own that though it speak to us and touch us, its language is all but strange and its meaning wholly a mystery. Nature tells us little except by association with hearts that have beaten for ours, and then sometimes she tells us all. But the heart itself is the thing, the reality, the seat of all our thoughts and the stay of all our being. Selfishly we see what it does in